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## Beyond #WithYou: The New Generation of Feminists and the #MeToo Movement in South Korea

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The #MeToo movement has shaken Korea over the last two years (Hasunuma and Shin 2019). Prosecutor Seo Ji-hyun's<sup>1</sup> public testimony in January 2018 charged a former Ministry of Justice official with sexual harassment and catalyzed the #MeToo movement. Hundreds of Korean women came forward and spoke up about being sexually abused by powerful men. Social media platforms were flooded with hashtags such as #WithYou to support the movement and to express solidarity with victims of sexual violence. Women have taken to the streets for months demanding government action to prevent and punish sexual violence.

Many high-profile men have been accused of sexual violations and stepped down. In 2020, the mayors of Korea's two largest cities were inculpated, and the ruling party suffered a crushing defeat in the subsequent by-election. The magnitude and influence of the #MeToo movement in Korea is unprecedented.

This article answers why the Korean #MeToo movement is so powerful and influential. It argues that the #MeToo movement is strong when the victim or perpetrator is a famous figure, when powerful figures are continuously accused in a short period of time, and when there is social sympathy and support for the victim. Among these factors, the article emphasizes the third factor, that young generation of Korean women are the driving force behind the #MeToo movement. Their demands made it possible for the movement to extend beyond the mere denunciation of

1. I use the order of family name first, followed by first name, according to the Korean custom.

high-profile individuals to advocate for reforms of the structural gender inequality and entrenched sexism of Korean society.

## EXPOSING THE GENDERED POWER STRUCTURE AND THE FALL OF POWERFUL MEN

The #MeToo movement was most notable in politics, arts and entertainment, sports, and schools in Korea. What is common in these sectors is that power and authority are concentrated among a small number of male leaders. High-profile male leaders in politics usually assume overarching authority over their staffers regarding employment, relocation, and promotion. For staffers and those who want to enter politics, “reputation” is crucial, and loyalty to male political leaders determines their reputation. Such unequal power relations can render staffers vulnerable to harassment, preventing them from criticizing the behavior of their leaders or offending the feelings of their superiors.

Women are particularly vulnerable in male-dominated organizations. Male political staffers are likely to share more interests with their male leaders. They often hold the same sexist views as their leaders about women’s roles and deem women unequal to men because women are not considered ambitious enough to pursue political power. The gendered political culture has led men, powerful or not, to presume that they are “entitled” to women’s service and emotional attention (Manne 2017).

If a woman accuses a political leader of sexual harassment, the political camp assumes that her charges harm not just the political leader’s reputation, but also the entire party. As a result, members of the political unit concerned often discredit or disavow the allegations made by the victim to protect the larger group and retaliate against the victim. Society is also likely to sympathize with the perpetrator, who is often regarded as more credible and who has much more to lose from the accusation. Such dynamics have silenced women and discouraged them from speaking about the sexual violence perpetrated against them.

Seo Ji-hyun’s public testimony empowered women to break this long silence. When she reported being harassed by a senior prosecutor in 2010, the prosecutor’s office, instead of protecting Seo, transferred her from Seoul to an office hundreds of kilometers away (Seo 2018). Empowered by the global #MeToo movement, Seo decided to speak publicly and wanted to help other victims understand that they should not be blamed. It was a powerful message calling for solidarity with the victims of sexual violence who had been forced to suffer in silence.

Seo's testimony spurred a cascade of allegations against leading authorities in the worlds of arts and culture, sports, politics, and schools in the following months. The media was plastered with #MeToo allegations against harassers. Among the most shocking was the allegation of sexual violence against An Hee-jeong, governor of Chungnam Province, who was a rising star in politics. A member of An's staff, Kim Ji-eun, publicly aired her experience.<sup>2</sup> Kim's testimony was shocking both because Governor An had cultivated a pro-women image and because it revealed the manner in which An's status as a prospective presidential hopeful had justified his power like "a king" over the personnel in his camp (Kim 2020). Kim was gaslit, convinced that her job obliged her to protect An's political career and personal reputation (Kim 2020). That authority made it impossible for Kim to resist An's demands for sexual relations. Encouraged by the #MeToo movement and desperate to stop him, Kim disclosed An's harassment and filed a criminal case against him for sexual assault and harassment.

High-profile #MeToo cases continued to be revealed thereafter. The mayors of Seoul and Busan, the two largest cities in Korea, have faced accusations of sexual harassment. The allegations levied against Park Won-soon, a human rights lawyer who became the mayor of Seoul, astounded the nation. As a champion of women's rights and gender equality, he appeared the most unlikely male politician to commit a sexual crime. Nonetheless, the victim revealed that she had been sexually harassed for four years during the time she had worked as his secretary. She was unable to secure any assistance in the course of those years, even though she kept asking her superiors to move her to another position (Yoon and Kim 2020). Rather, her superiors tasked her with a job to "please" the mayor because they thought Park liked her presence.

These consecutive #MeToo cases against high-profile men exposed the gendered power structure in which any man could become a predatory harasser if he occupied a powerful position in a hierarchical organization without external monitoring and regulation.

## SUPPORT FOR THE #MeToo MOVEMENT

A decisive factor that makes the #MeToo movement strong and influential is public support for the movement and its victims. It unfolded in two ways in

2. JTBC, a cable television station, aired live broadcasts of five victims of sexual harassment in several high-profile cases, including Seo and Kim in 2018. It also broadcast a follow-up interview with Seo in 2019.

Korea: through women NGO activists who organized themselves to tackle the problem collectively, and through public opinion formation on the internet.

On March 15, 2018, women's NGOs collaboratively established a coalition network called Citizens Action to Support the MeToo Movement, with the mission to support victims, raise public consciousness, and advocate for legal reform to bring the perpetrators of sexual violence to justice. Its manifesto declared that democracy could not be accomplished without gender equality (Citizens Action to Support the MeToo Movement 2018) and that sexual violence was founded on structural gender inequality. Citizens Action defined the #MeToo movement as an urgent call for the fundamental reform of structural social inequalities and the culture of rape. A "joint committee" comprising activists, lawyers, and volunteers was instituted to tackle #MeToo cases and a series of offline protests.

The group organized a public event, "Women Speak for 2018 Minutes Straight," where numerous women took to the stage to share their personal narratives of sexual abuse and violence. Participants gathered, listened to each other, and supported one another. A wall was designated for written notes and messages shared by women who were unable to speak or felt uncomfortable speaking on stage. This event was followed by six street rallies, called the "Protest to End Sexual Discrimination and Violence," to raise consciousness of the proliferation of sexual violence. The fifth protest occurred on August 14, 2018, immediately after the district court ruled that An Hee-jeong was innocent. More than 20,000 citizens participated in that protest,<sup>3</sup> making it the largest of the six 2018 rallies (Han 2018).

Public opinion formation was led by the younger generation of unorganized women who grew up with social media. They shared a sense of fear and frustration about the absence of any effective policies to handle sexual violations online and offline. Their anger against sexual violence and exploitation appeared in concrete form when an incident of femicide occurred at Gangnam Station in South Seoul in 2016. Thousands of young women gathered at Gangnam Station to commemorate the victim and bring sexual violence to social attention. That decisive moment presented a new generation of feminists to Korean society: the population of adolescent girls and women in their thirties became representatives of strong support for the #MeToo movement.

These women joined hashtag movements such as #WithYou online in tandem with #MeToo to display solidarity with the victims of sexual violence.

3. The Appellate Court overturned the verdict and sentenced An to three years and six months in prison. A year later, on September 9, 2019, the Supreme Court confirmed this verdict.

As the power of the #MeToo movement was magnified, a hidden camera incident at Hongik University triggered another offline feminist protest in May 2018. A gathering of 10,000 to 60,000 protesters at Hyehwa Station in North Seoul condemned the gender bias evident in the police investigation of the hidden camera crime. They argued that the police had conducted massive investigations, including a search for the seizure of the perpetrator's home and overseas servers, only because the perpetrator was a woman, whereas the police had previously frequently dismissed reports filed by women victims of such illegal activities (Chun 2018). The Hyehwa Station protests were recorded as the largest among the demonstrations by women in Korea. Most protesters participated through internet cafés and social media, as they had done before with the Gangnam Station commemoration. Young feminist activist groups had organized six such demonstrations by December 2018.

Feminism was found by young women to be an empowering tool in the campaign against sexual crimes committed against women. However, the government was slow in responding to the sentiments articulated by protesting women. In the summer of 2019, Citizens Action organized 10 more rallies in Seoul's central square over 10 consecutive weeks. Each rally was dedicated to the demand for the resolution of one of 10 issues pertaining to sexual violence. The goals of such campaigns transcended the mere protection of and support for victims of sexual violence and included fundamental reforms of the gendered power structure.

## MEANINGFUL ACHIEVEMENTS, BUT A LOT STILL TO ACCOMPLISH

Meaningful achievements have accrued from the endeavors of feminist activists. The Prosecutor's Office and the National Assembly conducted surveys and investigations on sexual harassment for the first time. More than 60% of women prosecutors reported having experienced sexual harassment, and 85% of them had encountered disadvantages in relation to promotion, work evaluations, and the distribution of tasks (Lee 2018).

The National Assembly's Ethics Committee conducted a survey of its 2,750 members, from staff members to legislators. In all, 11.3% of the respondents (97 women, 2 men) reported experiences of sexual harassment, and 38.1% (338 people) claimed to have seen or heard of others facing sexual harassment. Most victims were harassed when they were interns or when they occupied the lowest employment rank. Conversely, most of the alleged harassers were high-ranking men (8 cases) and highest-level personnel (21 cases).

These results formed the basis for new guidelines and organizational reforms to prevent and handle cases of sexual violence. The government reinstated a gender equality policy officer in eight ministries and agencies to establish and implement sexual harassment and violence prevention policies. A public sector Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence Reporting Center was also established for every ministry.

Hundreds of “MeToo Bills” have been proposed to the National Assembly since 2018. The Special Act on the Punishment of Sexual Violence and laws pertaining to digital crimes and online sexual violence have been revised to strengthen punishment (Chae 2019). Also, a new Basic Law on the Prevention of Violence Against Women was enacted,<sup>4</sup> although an amendment to the Criminal Law to redefine rape and adultery has yet to be delivered.<sup>5</sup>

There has also been a backlash against the victims of sexual violence. Victim-blaming incidents still continue, and the ruling party is not proactive enough in addressing them. The backlash against #MeToo often takes the form of partisan politics: supporters of the ruling party are liable to claim that the #MeToo movement has been fabricated by their political opponents.

## CONCLUSION

The #MeToo movement in Korea and globally has proved that any meaningful change begins when victims are heard and believed without attempts to distort their narratives. Such a change was felt to be real in Korea. An absolute majority of the public approved of the #MeToo movement in 2018 and 2019 (Korea Research Institute 2019),<sup>6</sup> and they believed that the #MeToo movement has benefited Korean society through increased awareness, support for victims of sexual violence, and the fostering of organizational change to fight against gender discrimination. While more women than men in all generations support the #MeToo movement, young women have become the drivers of this change. One study reveals that 48.9% of women in their twenties define themselves as feminists (KWDI 2018). Their voices became distinct in the 2021 by-

4. The Basic Law defined “secondary harm” inflicted on victims of sexual violence for the first time. However, the “victim of sexual violence” applies only to women.

5. Women have demanded an amendment of the Criminal Law on rape and adultery to reflect the contemporary notion that “sex without consent is illegal.” The current law requires “violence and intimidation” as a condition for proof of rape and adultery.

6. 80.7% for women and 60.7% for men.

election for the Seoul mayor, in which 15% of women in their twenties voted for feminist candidates of minor parties (Lee 2021), whereas more than 95% of voters of other age groups voted for candidates of the two large parties. These women have grown up facing the contradictions between the official declarations of gender equality and the realities of sexual exploitation in neoliberal patriarchal society. Their collective experiences made them new political agents of social change during the #MeToo movement.

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